

LAKE OKEECHOBEE...

fish, floods and farms



Above: "Sago" at the dock on Sunday morning, November 18, 1912, and map that shows areas damaged by hurricanes in 1926 and 1928.

Sometimes referred to as Florida's inland sea, geologists estimate that Lake Okeechobee was formed 6,000 years ago when ocean waters receded and water was left in a shallow depression that became the lake bed.

Lawrence E. Will, author of *A Cracker History of Okeechobee*, describes Lake Okeechobee in the early 1900s:

"Whether you were watching the ripples rolling on the grassy southern shore . . . or stalking wild hogs under the shadowy, vine roofed custard apple trees . . . you couldn't help but feel the grandeur of the lake's expanse and the beauty of its unspoiled wooden shores."

Lake Okeechobee first came into the national spotlight when U.S. troops battled Seminoles along the northern shore on Christmas Day, 1837. Its Seminole name – "Oki" meaning "big," and "chubi" meaning water – became Okeechobee.

In 1881 Hamilton Disston, a millionaire who loved to fish in South Florida, purchased 4 million acres of land in Florida, including all of Lake Okeechobee. His dredging and draining operations encouraged the development of farms and communities around the lake.

Catastrophic hurricanes in 1926 and 1928 killed thousands of people and caused millions of dollars in damage, prompting the government to step in to improve water control structures to protect farms as well as the region's population.



Above: Steamboat "Suwanee" in the Three-mile Canal to Lake Okeechobee. The only steamer operating through the heart of the Everglades, the "Suwanee" made regular trips between Ft. Myers and Ft. Lauderdale, traveling through the Caloosahatchee, Lake Okeechobee and the North New River Canal, early 1900s.



John Kunkel Small was a taxonomist and botanical explorer. He photographed Lake Okeechobee's shoreline vegetation in 1917 (above) and wrote about it in a 1918 *American Museum Journal* article:

*"The natural plant covering is the hardwood growth known in the southern United States as 'hammock.' The trees consist principally of cypress (*Taxodium*), strangling-fig (*Ficus*), pond apple (*Annona*), pop ash (*Fraxinus*), and elder (*Sambucus*). The growth is impenetrable except with the aid of a machete."*

Below: The Hotel Bolles on Ritta Island – built in 1911 by land developer Richard J. Bolles to house prospective land buyers. From the cupola, buyers were told that their lots were "somewhere over there" (usually under water), 1918.



Below: John Kunkel Small's crew maneuvering their boat into a deeper channel, 1917.



"Defying alligators and giant catfish, not to mention other strange animals that might have been prowling in the dark waters . . . We gradually maneuvered the boat into this deeper channel and finally found our way to the head of the canal leading to Fort Lauderdale."

— John Kunkel Small, *American Museum Journal*, 1918

“Nothing could appear more queenly and magnificent than Lake Okeechobee as we came upon it . . . The great basin is a shallow pool on the oolitic limestone, in a frame of sawgrass, whose pale straw-color is brought out against the distant vaporous, velvety bronze and green of the red bay.”

— Wallace Harney, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 1884